

VZCZCXRO7356
PP RUEHGI
DE RUEHLGB #0183/01 0550744
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 240744Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY KIGALI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2408
INFO RUEHXR/RWANDA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KIGALI 000183

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/C and DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [RW](#)
SUBJECT: 2006 SECTOR-LEVEL ELECTIONS: ORDERLY, HIGH VOTER
TURNOUT, BUT FEW CANDIDATES

REF: KIGALI 146

This is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

11. (SBU) Summary: The second phase of 2006 Rwanda local elections, conducted February 20 at the sector level, proceeded smoothly. Polling sites were easy to find and easy to access, and local National Electoral Commission staff appeared to follow established guidelines and procedures. Voters were generally provided voting instructions and privacy. Security forces were present outside polling stations, but unobtrusive. There were no signs of intimidation or coercion of voters or other serious procedural irregularities. Overall, the voter participation level was high, ranging from approximately 75 to 90 percent of the estimated 4.1 million registered voters. Observers from various embassies noted, however, the low number of candidates and high number of last-minute candidate withdrawals, which created some confusion among voters and raised questions about possible political influence in the selection of candidates. End summary.

Balloting Procedure

12. (U) The direct elections, conducted by secret ballot at the sector level, were generally well-organized and orderly, starting at or close to the scheduled starting time of 7 a.m. and concluding promptly at 3 p.m. Voting was for two positions -- a general sector representative to the District Council and a female representative to the district level. (Note: The Rwandan Constitution sets aside a minimum of 30 percent of all elected government positions for women. End note.)

13. (U) Observers reported that voters lined up early to vote and that the elections proceeded smoothly and technically correctly, with voters generally given voting instructions and afforded privacy in make-shift voting booths. The number of ballots was sufficient, and most voters seemed familiar with the procedure. National Police and Local Defense Forces (LDF) were present but unobtrusive. While some observers noted inconsistencies in the vote count, the overall voting procedure, including the number of local National Electoral Commission (NEC) staff per polling station, was generally consistent across all polling sites. Candidates were not present at the polling sites, but their representatives were allowed to observe the proceedings throughout the day, including the vote count. The vote count was open and transparent, taking approximately 2-1/2 hours.

Weaknesses and Irregularities

¶4. (SBU) The balloting proceeded without coercion, harassment, or intimidation of voters or other serious irregularities. Observers noted, however, some weaknesses in ballot box security and verification of prior voting. While ballot boxes were sealed tight with tape and stamped when the polls closed to prevent any tampering until commencement of the vote count, observers noted that, except when nailed shut, boxes were not tightly secured throughout the balloting, although they were never out of the direct sight of NEC staff and voters.

¶5. (SBU) In addition, the post-vote marking of fingers with indelible ink and the annotation of voter cards were inconsistent across polling stations. Observers noted that NEC assessors did not appear to check voters' fingers for evidence of prior voting to prevent multiple voting. Some observers noted the presence of political figures at polling sites. Other personnel, including non-uniformed "security personnel," also wandered in and out of some polling stations.

¶6. (SBU) During the vote count, NEC staff in most precincts displayed ambiguously marked ballots to all observers, including the candidates' representatives, and sought their opinions as to whether the votes should be counted and, if so, how they should be tallied. Consensus was generally reached on these cases. At the end of the vote count, however, when there was a discrepancy between the number of ballots cast for a position and the number of voters who had voted at a given station, NEC staff in several instances simply decided to declare uncast ballots as spoiled/unmarked to reconcile the discrepancy. In some cases with clear victors, counting appeared to proceed with more interest in

KIGALI 00000183 002 OF 002

speed than accuracy, though this did not affect the overall result.

Lack of Candidates and Last-Minute Withdrawals

¶7. (SBU) In a meeting with observers from other embassies February 21 to share observations, all agreed that the non-partisan elections were technically and procedurally superior to the February 6 cell-level elections (reftel) and the balloting procedure generally orderly and transparent. The basic rules were observed, and there were no significant problems. Observers noted, however, that at almost every polling site there were candidates who had withdrawn, which created some confusion among voters and raised questions about possible political influence in the selection of candidates.

¶8. (SBU) Observers questioned whether there was unauthorized campaigning prior to election day, whether candidates were listed on the ballot in any particular order, and if so, who determined the order of candidates, and whether there was favoritism for the candidate listed on top. Some noted that candidates listed on top received most of the votes and that their photos were clearest. One observer noted that at one polling site, four of six candidates had withdrawn for personal reasons. No further explanations were provided for the withdrawals. Some voters in the polling station were confused because the ballots still listed all the candidates and they were not aware that candidates had withdrawn. Another observer remarked that illiterate voters may have simply voted for candidates pointed out by local NEC staff on the ballot when providing voting instructions. Some observers wondered whether the participation level was high because Rwandans believe in the democratic process or because they believe that voting is compulsory.

Media Coverage

¶9. (U) Government-owned Radio Rwanda, one of only two radio stations that provided nationwide coverage of the elections, reported that in the southern city of Butare there were convicted genocidaires who had received their voting cards prior to conviction but were not allowed to vote under the electoral law which prohibits convicted genocidaries from voting. Radio Flash FM did not report any irregularities.

¶10. (U) VOA reported that the elections went well, commenting that "perfection is not humanly possible." It also reported that "there were reports that some candidates were forced to withdraw their candidacy." The Vice President of the Electoral Commission, however, informed VOA that candidates had made their own decisions and that no one had forced them to withdraw. The Vice President also told VOA that there was one NEC staff member who was detained for not adhering to NEC regulations.

¶11. (U) According to pro-government newspaper "The New Times," Minister of Internal Affairs Christophe Bazivamo called upon the electorate to hold the newly elected local leaders accountable. "Voters shouldn't only be active in the elections and turn away from overseeing the commitment of the elected leaders during their five-year tenure of office," he commented. "They should be watchdogs to make sure that the leaders deliver on what they promised. Keeping an open eye helps to identify the leaders' mistakes and monitor their performance." Bazivamo warned losers to "respect the voters' decision since there has to be a loser and winner in any democratic electoral exercise."

¶12. (SBU) Comment: Although voting is not compulsory at the local elections level, voter turnout was very high. One explanation for the high turnout may be the perception among Rwandan voters that it is necessary to prove participation in elections to receive some government services (e.g., passports). (Note: Every Rwandan citizen is issued a voter identification card, which is stamped by an election official after voting to verify participation. End note.) The success of the elections reflected in part by the overall high voter participation level, however, was offset somewhat by the large number of unexplained last-minute candidate withdrawals and low number of candidates. While generally the non-partisan elections proceeded smoothly with no serious irregularities or violations and balloting was viewed as free and fair, observers questioned the extent of political influence in the process.